

Marketing as a Strategic Tool in Veterinary Clinics of Small Animals

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Abstract

This survey was conducted from October 2012 to July 2013 in order to highlight the role of marketing as a strategic tool used to leverage business in the veterinary field that can make a difference in customer loyalty. Good services in this segment strengthen the image of both the professional and the company in such a competitive market nowadays. Initial service, technical support, and post customer service strengthen the bond of client-service provider that forms lasting partnerships and disseminates free of charge, through word of mouth, the activities offered and the way they are provided when the quality is good and exceeds expectations of customers.

Keywords: veterinary marketing, small business marketing, entrepreneurship

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In marketing terms, small animals have marked global relevance, as business in this sector has increased considerably in recent decades, as can be evidenced by the steady increase in the market of food, pharmaceuticals, drugs, and special diets for the segment. In particular, within the pet shop sector, there is a development and specialization in food and pharmaceutical products according to the needs of dogs. Thus, there are a wide variety of services that are available for a consumer looking for news and information in this regard. For implementation and knowledge of products and services, marketing strategies are important, and among them: price, product, distribution (sales point), and promotion allow to place these products and services with emphasis on establishments and, by this way, to promote sales, which Kotler (2000) titled as marketing mix or 4 Ps, as mentioned by McCarthy (1996).

The main idea is that a veterinarian offers everything a pet/dog needs and provides specific health programs, veterinary medicines, proper feed, proceeding in a way that the patient receives the very best, thereby satisfying owners with the quality of treatment (Pereira, 2009a). Marketing in case of veterinary services/products is not a set of traps to mislead the consumers or to induce the customers to spend on what they don't want or on something that they don't need. A major goal of marketing techniques is to have customers for life, make them loyal, so it is important to get their confidence by providing them good experiences and especially, strengthening the commitment to their pet (Pereira, 2010a). Therefore, marketing constitutes a system of activities that interact

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with a designed plan, fix the sale price, propagate and deliver services that comply with those required by customers and patients, always recognizing and meeting their requirements, needs, and wishes (Pereira, 2012c).

Disclosure About the Services Provided

There are several reasons that can bring new customers to a veterinary clinic:

- (1)** The purchase of a first pet,
- (2)** The provision of differentiated and specialized services in different areas of veterinary medicine,
- (3)** Owners are unhappy with the services provided in other establishments,
- (4)** Easy location and access to the business, and
- (5)** Recommendations from friends and colleagues.

However, potential customers gain information about a clinic from friends, colleagues, clinic sites, read online reviews, and check pages in social networks (Felsted & Lee, 2013). The "word of mouth" marketing works very well in these cases. In the search for a veterinary service, the customer wants quality, safety, and accessibility adequated to his/her animal's needs. So, the veterinarian has to exceed the customers' expectations and offer a service better than expected, differentiating from other competitors and interacting with the customers (Pereira, 2009b ; Pereira, 2010a). Delighting the customer can lead to loyalty.

Many owners have a strong emotional involvement with their dogs/pets. These customers should be heard and treated with patience and understanding by the veterinary clinic crew in a standardized, affectionate, and respectful way (Giosso, Kornfeld, & Rodrigues, 2011 ; Pereira, 2009b; Pereira, 2010a; Pereira, 2012b). Through these relationship practices, ties with the customers can be established, and they may be likely to return and fulfill the asked recommendations. An important point is to make business cards available to new customers at the end of the consultation, with all the veterinary clinic data, such as address, phone, email, and social networking pages (Felsted & Lee, 2013).

Professionals use available resources on the Internet and social networks as ways to attract customers, creating a website, blog, or a social network page of the business, with the clinic brand, adding photos of its space and crew, presenting good appearance, which helps to publicize the service. Initially, the professional usually publicizes the website for his/her loyal and regular customers, asking the same for authorization to disseminate photos and stories of their dogs/pets, so his/her customers will be able to give comments and testimonials. Through social networking, you can publicize services and resources to diagnose and educate customers about nutrition and obesity, or even about the importance of different diets applied for different pathologies. It is interesting to make available a link to customers or visitors with information about the need of preventive care of their pets/dogs (Felsted & Lee, 2013).

There may also be, on a website, an online pharmacy with medication information presenting human products that are toxic to pets/dogs and promoting the dissemination of veterinary pharmaceutical products available in the clinic. Another smart option is the inclusion of educational videos on various topics, such as animal welfare or about the importance of dental cleaning for the clients of the establishment (Materni & Tumblin, 2013). By creating such a page, it is possible to create partnerships with the pharmaceutical companies, such as laboratories, pharmacies, and veterinarian stores, seeking sponsorship and real promotion of their brands and products, leading to lower investment in this type of advertising by a company, besides expanding the network ; thereby increasing the reliability regarding a company.

A web page is an excellent opportunity of business promotion, since the Internet is the greatest information source nowadays. There are, already, original pages, which contain information such as products and services

offered, operation hours, address, phone, curiosities about animals' races, and even scheduling bathing and grooming (Salvador, 2007). However, the creator of the page must be careful and clear about the content and should utilize easy-access keywords for its articles (Schaible, 2012).

Marketing strategies are numerous and aim to retain good customers and acquire new ones. Thereby, a mixture of various media are valid : direct mail, e-mails, phone calls, and explanatory brochures, that is, integrated communication is the most effective. In this aspect, the professional cannot be inconvenient, spamming the customers with emails and calling an animal owner too many times. A call from a vet after a consultation or performed surgical procedure to inform the condition of a pet is recommended; not to advertise products (Giosso et al., 2011). Another way to differentiate among establishments is to support actions with social involvement. Veterinary hospitals in the U.S. have been prepared in gathering supplies for people and animals to be given to local charity institutions, being given a discount on services to the customer when bringing a donation (Tudor, 2013).

Suggested marketing actions constitute a proposal which everyone wins. The client gains in economy and satisfaction of having a healthy pet; the patient will benefit the most, gaining in health and wellness ; and the veterinarian gains by offering a quality service for an extended period, maintaining economic viability throughout the year (Pereira, 2007). What is important is not the quantity, but the quality of communication. It is extremely important that a client understands the quality of treatment offered, being vital to educate and inform the customer of a veterinarian's role in his/her pet's life, using appropriate marketing techniques (Pereira, 2010b).

The veterinarian should ensure that an owner and a patient feel comfortable and are in a safe environment (Stewart, 2008). This business establishment must provide accommodations, facilities and suitable environment for patients and owners, as well as water, tea, coffee, sweets, and biscuits and the availability of a presentable toilet. In situations of rain, it is interesting for clients having a member of your staff, with an umbrella, in attendance to help clients when leaving and entering the clinic towards their vehicles (Barforoush, 2012 ; Stewart, 2008).

In intelligent scheduling, whenever possible, the appointments are scheduled for patients according to species. Cats who do not share their home with dogs may become anxious and stressed when taken to a veterinary clinic and ,therefore, should be placed in a separate and private environment, preferably in a shipping box in an isolated room (Stewart, 2008). Preferably, the patients should not move freely throughout the establishment, as once they are free, they can cause accidents, can hurt/insult other animals, escape, or even spread disease. To show a personal touch, each staff member can greet customers by owners' and pets' name, thank them for the visit to the clinic, and should take a photo of the animal for maintaining a medical record. Regardless of who is at the front desk, customers receive the same warm greeting, and it becomes a trademark of its practice (Stewart, 2008).

According to Las Casas (2006), it costs five times more to win a new customer than to keep an existing customer. Thus, small details make a huge difference and should not be neglected, such as hygiene around the place, ease of approach, operating hours, appointment scheduling, always treating customers and patients by name, full explanation of procedures, and full billing (Pereira, 2012b). Some clinics have a separate reception room, where an owner can wait while his/her pet is attended or undergoes any surgical procedure (Pereira, 2009b). It is important to remember that the veterinary service can be of high quality but, in a matter of seconds, one careless placement of a crew member can put everything away.

Over the years, dog/pet owners have become more demanding as they learn how to spend money on what really matters. Thereby, in clinical practice, clients study and examine their chances of spending in relation to the diagnosis methods and treatment forms, questions, discuss and refuse services if the explanations are not persuasive, or if feel that their pet is not safe with a veterinarian (Tracey, 2011). The more education and respect the clinic staff shows to an owner and patient, the better is its reputation (Tracey, 2011). The way a customer is

treated makes a difference against competition. It is worth mentioning that a patient's needs must be attended, and a customer may be psychologically unstable (due to the illness/distress to a pet) - in such cases, a gesture, a well-placed word can make a difference. It is known that simply speaking may not be sufficient. So, the vocabulary should be simple, non technical, and at the end of the service, the professional has to be sure that the customer has understood his/her recommendations (Pereira, 2008). It is important that a veterinarian conducts a careful physical examination of a patient and discusses what is happening with the pet owner, explaining clearly and honestly, the risks involved around the disease in question, options for diagnosis and treatment modalities accurately, prioritizing less aggressive behaviors. The pet owner, at this moment, reaffirms his/her confidence in the professional regarding the investment of his time and money (Tracey, 2011).

In relation to expanded services, medical specialties and programs must be designed to meet the needs of each client and patient in particular. Two examples of programs can make a difference in the competitive market in the pet world. The first of these programs is pediatrics. Guidelines to customers should be made available in the first consultation, with the settlement of a prophylactic, infectious, and parasitic schedule, as well as the elucidation of balanced nutrition importance for growth and dog/pet development (Pereira, 2005). The second program is geriatrics. For example, when a dog reaches the age of seven, and starts to become an aged animal, it requires special care to stay healthy and have an increased life expectancy (Pereira, 2012a). The main idea is that to meet all the needs of an elderly dog; it is appropriate to offer a complete geriatric program. The vet, then, conducts a survey of registered animals with 7 years or more and gets in contact with the customer to explain about senility and demonstrate concern for the health of his/her patient. From this alert, the owner realizes that the dog is aging and this is crucial for its accession to the geriatric program (Pereira, 2012a). The customer is informed that the prevention and control of diseases, such as heart disease and silent nephropathy is the best option for the pet, while minimizing costs. The longer the dog lives, the longer he/she will be served by the clinic, and the owner will be a satisfied customer. In today's competitive market, differentiated programs contribute greatly to customer loyalty and business growth (Pereira, 2012a).

Geriatrics, dentistry, nutritional counseling, and pelage care are the most timely clients' activation, however, there are many other services and medical specialties. Since nobody knows everything, the recommendation is to make partnerships with other colleagues, outsource various medical specialties, keeping your customers satisfied and present in your clinic or hospital (Pereira, 2007). An annual marketing schedule can be maintained by choosing the month of geriatrics, with offers for the geriatric profiles. Each month, there may be a type of service discount, and thus, with defined calendar, it is possible to prepare educational materials and train employees outlining the details of monthly activities (Pereira, 2007). The creation of this calendar attracts new customers and strengthens ties with existing ones.

Some services are popular among pet owners and can improve and increase the business profitability as suggested by SEBRAE (Brazilian Service of Support for Micro and Small Enterprises) :

(1) Happy Day : The owner leaves his/her dog for a whole day, so he/she can play with other dogs. The dog has 10 hours of fun (from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m.).

(2) Dog Daycare or Gym : The gym performs activities with animals to improve the behavior of dogs, causing them to spend energy, ensuring the balance of the animal and reducing problems of hyperactivity, aggression, and anxiety. The daycare is open Monday to Friday from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m., and offers three meals daily, collective play, walks, relaxing dry baths, and manners lessons, involving basic training.

(3) Therapeutic Treatment : In the form of massage for dogs, it helps in treating the spine, strengthens muscles, balances the immune system, and promotes tranquility. Various massage techniques may be used such as,

shiatsu, yoga, and even lymphatic drainage. The most important is that the cost for the provision of this service may be zero, if the entrepreneur makes partnerships or uses the space of his/her own clinic.

(4) Care at Home: Services such as bathing and grooming can be made at the customer's home; in addition, accessories, toys, and food can be taken to be sold.

(5) Modern Health Care : Veterinary medicine is getting closer to the human, then, there is a variety of equipment, medicines, and modern treatments to look after the health of a pet. Among the devices, there is one that maps the animal's bloodstream and another that evaluates spine and brain lesions and can detect tumors.

For greater satisfaction of the dog/pet owner, receptionists, nurses, and veterinarians must work at the same pace (so they're always accessible to the customer, responding to their inquiries and phone calls). Clients must be treated with education, compassion, good mood, and patience. The team must demonstrate care and concern for pets, for their stories, and listen to the concerns and needs of the owners (Stewart, 2008). In difficult customer satisfaction situations, the professional should ask himself/herself:

- ↳ Why is the customer unhappy?
- ↳ What should I do for the customer to feel happy in the situation?
- ↳ Is this something we could have done for the client? Why or why not?
- ↳ If not, how could we have communicated better or helped the customer to find what he/she needed elsewhere?

If customers are leaving a particular clinic, you need to know why. Thus, a letter may be sent to the client, asking the why for the disconnection, or be provided a special offer in the establishment served services, trying to bring him/her back (Stewart, 2008).

The act of purchasing does not arise magically. Its start is the motivation, that will lead to a need, which, in turn, awakens a desire, which, thereafter, gives rise to preferences for certain specific ways to meet the initial motivation, with these preferences directly related to self, that is, a client will tend to choose a product or service that matches the concept that he/she has or would like to have of himself/herself. However, in the opposite direction to motivation, there are the brakes, which is the awareness of risk explicitly related to the product or service (Karsaklian, 2000). So, it is not advisable to offer anything to a client, but attention needs to be focused upon the patient and show to the client the benefits that a product or service will bring to his/her pet, because this is the moment of truth.

The work team should be organized; its functions should be distributed, with each one in charge of certain tasks. This reduces stress and allows the attending of other customers to occur efficiently. All team members are important and should be valued. One difficulty can be challenging and/or can be an opportunity in the form of a continuous learning. The employee should be encouraged in their professional and personal growth, getting suggestions, and if it is the case, financial assistance in attending improvement courses (Barforoush, 2012). Development of people in organizations is broader than imagined, including, besides training, other tools, such as coaching, social responsibility activities, career management, trainee programs, job rotation, performance management, and feedback (Vilas Boas & Andrade, 2009). Soares and Pizzinato (2004) found that actions of internal employees reflect externally on companies. As tools, if used in an integrated and complementary way, denote excellence in providing services and in the care and treatment of their patients and clients.

Managerial Implications and Conclusion

Considering what has been said, we see the importance of participation of the company or manager in

coordinating activities such as planning, organization, coordination and control, which are essential in this line of business in finding the right service at the right time in the right place at a competitive price, reaching the expected quality, leading to satisfaction and customer loyalty. Marketing tools can greatly assist the work of a veterinarian and his/her collaborators. In providing professional services, a company/clinic should focus on fulfilling customers' needs and desires with respect to their pets. The strategies adopted by a company/clinic should be directed towards customer satisfaction so that there is a differentiation from competition. Many micro and small businesses close their doors before reaching one year of existence due to the problems of mismanagement and lack of market performance. A manager has an obligation to constantly improve and seek knowledge, as this segment grows and innovates all the time and who is not prepared is doomed to failure.

As can be inferred from the present study, this area has been neglected as there is little or no research related to marketing and management in the veterinary segment. In universities, there are generally no curriculum components on management, administration, and marketing principles related to the veterinary segment. Thus, professionals often have no notions of financial controls, marketing, and innovation with respect to this segment. Hence, there is need for reformulation of the curricula of schools of veterinary medicine, with the creation of specific courses in the area. Currently, we see this segment growing by leaps and bounds worldwide, and so, there is a need to seek formulas and ways to resolve the research gaps. A veterinarian professional needs to follow rules both at the technical level as in legal, beginning with one adequate business plan.

Limitations of the Study and Scope for Further Research

The study has reviewed existing literature on the subject. However, the strategies proposed here should be tested and analyzed individually, because this is a segment that is yet to be exploited, and innovation has become essential. So, every tool and every strategy should be very well evaluated and analyzed with respect to the costs / benefits and then be enhanced and adapted to the sector in search for a constant improvement in the delivery of customer service and loyalty. New research should be carried out taking into account the industry's innovation and new tools that can support the segment. We need further studies regarding the integration of services in the area of veterinary clinics, laboratories, veterinary hospitals, and pet shops facilitating the accessibility of clients and their pets. It is important to remember that pets and animals are a part of a customer's family, and pets require a lot of care and attention from health professionals, and the improvement in services is essential in this sector.

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